



# News Release

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## **West Nile virus: Tests confirm Washington's first death from disease**

*Yakima County woman died in September; state's human cases for year top 30*

**OLYMPIA** — The Washington State Department of Health has confirmed the first death due to West Nile virus within the state. The Yakima County woman in her 70s died last month. Confirmatory tests to specifically identify West Nile virus as the cause of her infection were performed at the Washington State Public Health Laboratories and at the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Before her illness, the woman spent time in both Yakima County and Colorado. She could've been exposed to the virus in either area, both of which have virus-carrying mosquitoes.

In addition to this case, 31 other West Nile infection cases have been reported with exposure in Washington during 2009, bringing the total this year to 32 human cases. Among these cases, 25 have had severe disease, including encephalitis, meningitis, and/or paralysis. Seven cases had mild illnesses, mostly with symptoms of fever and headache.

This is the state's highest yearly confirmed human case total since West Nile virus was first detected in Washington early this decade. A count of three cases in 2008 had been the previous top annual count.

Washington's West Nile virus monitoring program shows the virus was active this year in 15 counties, mostly in Eastern Washington — Yakima, Benton, Franklin and Grant counties have had the most detections of the virus. The Department of Health tracks West Nile virus in the environment in mosquitoes, birds, and horses or other mammals. This year, there have been 341 positive mosquito samples, 22 positive birds, and 67 positive horses. Five infected birds have been found in Western Washington — in King, Lewis, Grays Harbor, Pierce and Mason counties.

West Nile virus is primarily a bird disease that can be spread to people who are bitten by an infected mosquito. Most infected people do not become ill or have only mild symptoms, but West Nile virus can cause serious infections in the brain (encephalitis) or in the spinal cord (meningitis) and can be fatal. People over age 50 are at highest risk for these serious infections, though younger people can also develop severe illness.

There is no vaccine to prevent West Nile virus infection in people. The best way to prevent infection is to avoid mosquito bites. Now that cooler fall weather has arrived, mosquito activity is winding down. However, some mosquitoes may still be out. People should protect themselves against West Nile virus and other mosquito-borne illnesses by avoiding mosquito bites.

Information about [West Nile virus](#) is on the Department of Health's Web site.

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Visit the Washington Department of Health Web site at <http://www.doh.wa.gov> for a healthy dose of information.